

A HOME FOR THE IMAGINATION: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN  
THE POETRY OF ALLEN CURNOW, A. R. D. FAIRBURN,  
AND R. A. K. MASON

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by

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## Preface

The study from which this paper results was begun in 1965 at the University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, under the direction of Mr. Allen Curnow. Many thanks are due Mr. Curnow for his help and inspiration in the early stages of the study. Appreciation is also due Dr. William R. Moses and Dr. Brewster Rogerson, of the Kansas State University English Department, for their encouragement and guidance.

The collections of poetry on which the study is based do not contain the complete works of any of the three poets treated. Fairburn in particular was a very prolific writer. From his some nine volumes of poetry, I have selected for attention the two (Strange Rendezvous, 1952; Three Poems, 1952) which are considered by critics such as Allen Curnow to contain "all the best of his [Fairburn's] poetry."<sup>1</sup> The Mason and the Curnow collections (Mason's Collected Poems and Curnow's A Small Room With Large Windows) were edited by the poets themselves in 1962. The Mason collection includes almost all of Mason's published poems, and the two books are generally considered to contain the poets' most significant and representative works. Louis Johnson, for example, reviewing the two books for the 1964 New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, expressed the opinion that the books "enable a nearly total view of the achievement of the two

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Curnow, ed., The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1960), p. 320.

men."<sup>2</sup> One additional poem (A. R. D. Fairburn's "In the Younger Land") has been cited from the 1945 anthology, A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-1945, edited by Allen Curnow.

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<sup>2</sup>Louis Johnson, ed., New Zealand Poetry Yearbook (Christchurch, 1964, Vol. XI), 10.

Like many another young nation, New Zealand is very much interested in the development of a distinctive "national culture." A small country, long considered only a far-distant outpost of England and even now sometimes viewed, especially by Americans, as merely a group of islands off Australia, New Zealand is very self-conscious. Her people devour books by New Zealanders and about New Zealand. Art galleries in the cities display the works of local painters and sculptors, and their patrons search eagerly for the peculiarly New Zealand in theme or style. Local theater groups produce the dramas of New Zealand playwrights, and NZBC television interviewers discuss with New Zealand poets the implications of their works.

Little of any distinctively New Zealand art, it seems, has become known abroad. Troupes of Maori dancers tour the world from time to time (a group visited the United States and Canada in 1965), but relatively few outsiders have acquired any real knowledge or appreciation of the native Polynesian music. Or, in the area of literature, of the scores of published New Zealand writers of this century, only three--Katherine Mansfield, mystery-writer Ngaio Marsh, and educator-novelist Sylvia Ashton-Warner--have become widely known outside of New Zealand. Yet in poetry alone, a list of published New Zealand writers born in this century would include A. R. D. Fairburn, R. A. K. Mason, Charles Brasch, Charles Spear, Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, Kendrick Smithyman, James K. Baxter, C. K. Stead, and Charles Doyle, to name only some of the more prominent.

Part of the reason for the New Zealander's interest in his indigenous art would seem to be a hope that the artist can help to define New Zealand, to set down for his countrymen (and for the world) what it means to be a "Kiwi" (native New Zealander). Allen Curnow, in the introduction to his anthology A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-1945, put it this way: "Perhaps, returning so often to the theme of land and people, the particular theme of this land and people, some poets are making a home for the imagination, so that more personal and universal impulses may be set at liberty."<sup>1</sup>

The question then arises, to what extent are the artists actually doing this? To what extent are they defining or delineating the national character? Are they consciously concerned with the problem of "creating a home for the imagination"? To what extent are they succeeding in liberating the "more personal and universal impulses" of which Curnow speaks?

In seeking answers to these questions it is clearly beyond my scope to examine the work of all New Zealand artists, or even of all New Zealand poets. I have chosen, therefore, three poets--Allen Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn, and R. A. K. Mason--whose reputations may be considered established.

If New Zealand had a poet laureate it would probably be Allen Curnow (b. 1911). Alan Mulgan, in Great Days in New Zealand Writing, says of him, "Allen Curnow . . . is probably

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Curnow, ed., A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-1945 (Christchurch, 1945), p. 18.

the best known of our poets of the post-World War I generation."<sup>2</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, in an essay on New Zealand "Literature and the Arts," noted that "Allen Curnow has written some fine poetry," and praised Curnow's "feeling for the weight, color, and texture of words."<sup>3</sup> And Louis Johnson, editor of the 1964 New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, cited Curnow as one of the nation's "two leading poets" (the other being Mason, since deceased).<sup>4</sup>

A look at Curnow's selection of his own poems for A Small Room with Large Windows (Oxford University Press, 1962) shows him to be much concerned in his poetry, as in his criticism, with "the theme of land and people, the particular theme of this [I.e., New Zealand] land and people." In his introduction to the 1960 anthology The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, Curnow suggests as sources of the pressures which mould the work of New Zealand poets three features--"the isolation of the country, its physical character, and its history."<sup>5</sup> In his own poetry, we shall see, Curnow is especially interested in the history, though he is also concerned with the isolation and, to

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Mulgan, Great Days in New Zealand Writing (Wellington, 1962), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, "Literature and the Arts," in New Zealand, ed. Horace Belshaw (Berkeley, 1947), p. 248-249.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Johnson, ed. New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, XI (1964), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Curnow, Penguin, p. 17.

a lesser extent, with the physical character, as these have influenced the history.

A. R. D. Fairburn (1904-1957) was proud of being a fourth-generation New Zealander. In one of his essays, We New Zealanders: An Informal Essay (1944), he says: "My grandfather was born in this country in the year 1827. This is my country, and I am very glad to belong to it--in spite of everything."<sup>6</sup> Nothing could be more indicative of the attitude which emerges from Fairburn's poetry. He is especially concerned with the moral posture of his nation and with the individual's responsibility as a citizen. He examines critically New Zealand's efforts to achieve a Utopian society and comments on expatriation as a possible solution for the young Kiwi who feels stifled at home. And yet, for all his concern with the peculiar New Zealand situation, Fairburn is frequently dealing with problems which are common to many societies. In many of his shorter poems and especially in Dominion (a long poem on "The Dominion of New Zealand," the tone of which is sometimes tender, often sharply satirical, but finally hopeful) the details may be New Zealand, but the issues are the issues which face all men--human weakness and human greed, human love and aspirations.

A. R. D. Fairburn and R. A. K. Mason were friends and almost exact contemporaries. In his 1947 essay on New Zealand

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<sup>6</sup> As cited by Curnow in Penguin, p. 319.



art and literature, Fairburn paid tribute to his fellow-poet saying, "His [Mason's] ability to create poetic images is beyond doubt."<sup>7</sup> Mason's work has probably received more recognition outside of New Zealand than that of any other New Zealand poet. And in New Zealand, critical opinion is largely in agreement with Allen Curnow's evaluation of Mason as "his country's first wholly original, unmistakably gifted poet."<sup>8</sup>

In general, the poetry of R. A. K. Mason is not concerned with national history or morality nor with the relation of poet to country. Curnow suggests a reason for this when he says that "for Mason there is no other man" than the New Zealander, so complete is what Curnow calls Mason's "sense of community."<sup>9</sup> At any rate, the great majority of the pieces in Mason's Collected Poems of 1962 are personal poems--concerned with love and the loss of love; with life and death, both physical and spiritual: they seem to have no geography. And those few poems which do in some way or other remind us of the nationality of their author serve only to confirm the impression that Mason as poet affirmed and accepted his country, writing out of an already established sense of national identity.

In these three poets then, may be seen three very different approaches to the task of being a poet in New Zealand--

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<sup>7</sup> Fairburn, "Literature and the Arts," in New Zealand, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Allen Curnow, "Introduction," Collected Poems, by R. A. K. Mason (Wellington, 1962), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Penguin, p. 44. Italics added.

approaches ranging from Curnow's explicit search for a meaning in the history and geography of New Zealand to Fairburn's concern for the morality of his society to Mason's unself-conscious use of his nationality as a background for a more personal utterance. The choice of these three poets, to the exclusion of several others who might well have been selected, is based partly on personal preference and partly on availability of materials. A very different pattern would almost certainly emerge from a study of, say, Denis Glover, James K. Baxter, and Kendrick Smythman--but this difference would only serve to strengthen my thesis that the question of a national identity is one which each poet must handle (or bypass) in his own way.

#### ALLEN CURNOW

A substantial amount of Allen Curnow's poetry is devoted to a re-telling and re-interpreting of the early history of New Zealand. In "The Unhistoric Story," for example, he surveys his country's history from its discovery by Abel Tasman in 1642 through the years of colonization up to the present. Repeating the refrain

It was something different, something  
Nobody counted on,

in each of the six stanzas, the poet emphasizes his sense of the strangeness of the new land, the uniqueness of its effect on the men who came into contact with it.

In the first stanza, Curnow pictures Tasman, "whaling for continents coveted deep in the south": sent by the Dutch East India Company to try to discover the predicted southern continent, "the Land of Beach ignorant of the value of gold." Two lines

Morning in Murderers' Bay  
Blood drifted away

are enough to recall to any New Zealand schoolchild the story of Tasman's first stop in the South Island bay now known as "Golden Bay," where the native Maoris, having evidenced no hostility on the first evening, returned in the morning to kill four of the Dutch explorers. And the stanza closes with the ironic comment,

It was something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

Stanza two of "The Unhistoric Story" speaks of Captain James Cook, another well-known figure in New Zealand history. It was the reports of Cook's circumnavigation of New Zealand in the mid-eighteenth century which brought the existence of the islands to the attention of the world. Counting on his readers to fill out the sketch, Curnow characterizes Cook as a "spider, clever and fragile . . . [showing] how/ to spring a trap for islands." Cook, like Tasman before him, had been seeking a South Pacific continent, but instead of leading to such a new land mass, his explorations made quite clear the true size and shape of the islands of New Zealand.

Still as the collier steered  
No continent appeared;  
It was something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

(The collier is Cook, once apprenticed to a collier on the coast of his native England.)<sup>10</sup>

Stanza three describes in vigorous language the early visits to and the first tentative settlements of New Zealand by whalers, who found it a good place to replenish supplies. There are hints at contradictions in the early treatment of the native populations. Here again, as throughout this poem, Curnow assumes sufficient knowledge on the part of the reader to give meaning to his brief account.

The roving tentacles touched, rested, clutched  
Substantial earth, that is accustomed haven  
For the hungry whaler. Some inland, some hatched  
Rudely in bays, the shaggy foreshore shaven,  
Lusted, preached as they knew;  
But as the children grew  
It was something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

The fourth stanza touches very briefly the period of colonization and early development in New Zealand (roughly 1840-1900). The extending of British sovereignty over the islands by means of the Treaty of Waitangi, the growth of interest in timber and kauri gum in the north, the missionary endeavours among the Maoris, and the Maori Wars of 1860-1872 are among the points of history chosen by Curnow from this period of rapid change in the new colony, "all a rubble-rattle at Time's glacial push." But the New Zealand-based empire envisioned by leaders such as Sir Julius Vogel and Richard Seddon was not to be.

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<sup>10</sup> J. B. Condliffe and W. T. G. Airey, A Short History of New Zealand (Auckland, 1954), p. 14.

Vogel and Seddon howling empire from an empty coast  
 A vast ocean laughter  
 Echoed unheard, and after  
 All it was something different, something  
 Nobody counted on.

Stanza five brings us up to the present.

The pilgrim dream pricked by a cold dawn died  
 Among the chemical farmers, the fresh towns; among  
 Miners, not husbandmen, who piercing the side  
 Let the land's life, found like all who had so long  
 Bloodily or tenderly striven  
 To rearrange the given,  
 It was something different, something  
 Nobody counted on.

Here Curnow just touches a theme which occurs elsewhere in New Zealand literature and thought (and to which we shall refer again)--the theme of the "New Zealand Dream" for a better kind of society which has been lost somewhere between the glowing vision of the past and the cold realities of the present. The "miners" come to represent not only the hardy adventurers who came in the 1860's for gold, but all who "let the land's life" for their own profit. And the refrain takes on added depth as the poet asserts that it applies not to any one class or generation of New Zealanders but to "all who had so long/ Bloodily or tenderly striven/ To rearrange the given."

The closing stanza continues the idea of rearrangement, but with the emphasis on other than human agencies. "After all re-ordering of old elements," the poet says, "Time trips up all but the humblest of heart." But he refuses to be drawn any further in analyzing or criticizing either the specifically New Zealand situation or the general human situation to which an analogy is suggested. Instead, he returns to his refrain, and with a

change to present tense makes it cover a whole body of implied questions which he cannot, or at least will not, answer.

For many are called, but many are left at the start,  
And whatever islands may be  
Under or over the sea,  
It is something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

Another of Curnow's history poems, "A Victim" (like "The Unhistoric Story," originally from Island and Time, 1941) is a more detailed account of the Maori slaying of the four Dutch sailors in Murderers' Bay in 1642. Narrated by Jan Tyssen, one of the victims, the story begins with a dramatic flourishing of metaphor:

No prey for prowling keels, the south  
We found a monster risky to rouse  
That at the first approach bared teeth  
And slew four with terrible blows.

(11. 1-4)

The poem proceeds as uneditorialized history; here, as in his other references to the Murderers' Bay incident ("The Unhistoric Story," "Landfall in Unknown Seas"), Curnow declines to make any moral judgment on either slayers or slain. He seems interested only in telling the story, drawing on details, familiar to the student of New Zealand history, which were recorded in the journals of Tasman and others in his party--the first sighting of the mountains near the west coast of the South Island; the anchoring in the bay, where attempts were made to establish friendly relations with the Maoris; and the sudden, unexpected attack.

Mountains stood up (I, Tyssen, now  
Remember all thickly through the black  
Swoon of the savage's thrust) below  
Clouted, thin lipped, a dull surf spoke.

This land we coasted, came on a bay  
Calm where canoes slid slim at sunset;  
Wary we waited, heard a hollow voice cry,  
None came near, nor omen of onset:

Morning brought more canoes; we made  
Offer of mirrors, good iron pots,  
As orders were; but only the tide  
Plucked by paddles, and hoarse shouts

Answered. . . .

. . . . .

Blood bloomed and vanished where the wave  
Mouthed for the fruit of us they slew.

(11. 17-29, 35-36)

The narrative is competent, but not exciting. The echoes of old English rhythms and alliteration are interesting and produce some effective lines, but somehow the whole fails to fulfill the promise of its parts. Such an apt and vivid phrase as "blood bloomed and vanished" is the exception rather than the rule in this poem. Despite the ironic contrast pointed up between the "fabulous coast" which Tasman looked for and the "hateful haven" which he found, despite the sense of foreboding suggested by the picture of the calm bay overshadowed by Tyssen's remembering "all thickly through the black/Swoon of the savage's thrust"--despite these, the story does not really claim our sympathy. Perhaps it did not really claim the poet's either; the reason this subject seems to strike no sparks may be unintentionally explained by Curnow's comment (still in Tyssen's voice) in the closing two lines:

Your history's cold, and cold's my death,  
Past pity past anger, past forgiving.

(11. 39-40)

In contrast with the impartial and detailed narrative of "A Victim" stands "The Navigators," in which the bare suggestion of a story serves as background. In this sonnet, a further attempt to impose order on the history of New Zealand, the poet muses on the guilt of those

. . . rational successful hands that swept  
Sea treasures up, by sunlight as in fog  
Fumbling for islands. . . .

The hands, we learn, are blood-stained (the allusion to Lady Macbeth is unmistakable) and will not come clean though washed in ocean waves, "the bright stain like a flag/Flowing and floating." So, says the poet,

. . . Cradled in the value  
Currents where cables mumble murder slept

And sleeps, but dreams, hands that will not come clean  
In endless dumb show utter what they did;  
Because it was their rational violence  
To think discreet discharge of guns would add  
Island on island, that the seas would fence,  
And time confirm them, in a change of scene.

The title of this poem suggests that Curnow is thinking of the early explorers of the islands of New Zealand, perhaps especially of the French adventurer De Surville, whose treatment of the Maoris on his touching at New Zealand in 1869 is described by historians as "unjust and cruel."<sup>11</sup> But nothing in the poem itself requires such a limited application; indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> Condliffe and Airey, A Short History of New Zealand, p. 18.



the lack of particularity would suggest that the way was deliberately left open for a broader interpretation. The guilt may be shared by any in the history of New Zealand who sought to get what they desired by "discreet discharge of guns." And if we take into account the military situation in the Pacific at the time of writing (the poem was published in the collection Sailing or Drowning, 1943), the words may be seen as equally applicable to the invaders from the north who were then engaged in adding "island on island."

A fourth example of Curnow's poems on historical subjects, "Landfall in Unknown Seas," is probably the nearest to a "national poem" that New Zealand has. It was written for the 300th anniversary of the discovery of New Zealand by Abel Tasman, and as a part of the official celebration in 1942, Curnow read the poem to the accompaniment of specially-composed music.

In part I of the three-part poem, Curnow attempts to suggest the spirit of adventure and expectation which might have prevailed in 1642, when "simply by sailing in a new direction/You could enlarge the world." The tone of this section is relaxed, almost light-hearted, though indicating a hearty respect for the adventurers, including Tasman himself:

You picked your captain,  
Keen on discoveries, tough enough to make them,  
Whatever vessels could be spared from other  
More urgent service for a year's adventure;  
Took stock of the more probable conjectures  
About the Unknown to be traversed, all  
Guesses at golden coasts and tales of monsters  
To be digested into plain instructions  
For likely and unlikely situations.

(11. 2-10)

Considering the preparations (and the motivation) for such a voyage as Tasman's, the poet asserts that there was something more to it than simple desire for material gain or mere love of adventure. "An older enmity" existed, he says, between the islands of the South Seas and the Europeans who had set out to explore and to conquer the world:

. . . an older enmity  
Lodged in the searching mind, that would not tolerate  
So huge a hegemony of ignorance.

(11. 23-25)

So began, says Curnow, "on a fine morning, in the Name of God," a voyage which

. . . gave seas to history  
And islands to new hazardous tomorrows.

(11. 28-29)

Part II tells the story of the first sighting of land by Tasman and his men. Altering his verse form, Curnow recreates in a few vivid strokes the effect on the sea-weary sailors of "the seascape/Crammed with coast."

Suddenly exhilaration  
Went off like a gun, the whole  
Horizon, the long chase done,  
Hove to. . . .

(11. 30-33)

Returning briefly to the theme of "The Unhistoric Story"-- "It was something different, something/Nobody counted on." Curnow notes that beautiful as the new land appeared, it

Was less than the heart desired  
In its old Indian dream.

(11. 42-43)

And something about the strange coast, "a shadow, a finger of wind, forbade/Hopes of a lucky landing." The incident in

Murderers' Bay is sketched in a few lines which again place no blame on either explorers or natives. "Always to islanders," says Curnow,

. . . danger  
Is what comes over the sea;<sup>12</sup>  
Over the yellow sands and the clear  
Shallows, the dull filament  
Flickers, the blood of strangers.  
(11. 53-57)

And this part of the story closes with the matter-of-fact comment,

The dead required no further  
Warning to keep their distance;  
The rest, noting the failure,  
Pushed on with a reconnaissance  
To the north; and sailed away.  
(11. 62-66)

In part III, the poet contemplates the significance for today of the history he has just recounted.

Well, home is the Sailor, and that is a chapter  
In a schoolbook, a relevant yesterday  
We thought we knew all about, being much apter  
To profit, sure of our ground,  
No murderers mooring in our Golden Bay.  
(11. 1-5)

Now that the actual discovery of the islands is long past, he asks,

Who navigates us towards what unknown  
  
But not improbable provinces? Who reaches  
A future down for us from the high shelf  
Of spiritual daring? . . .  
(11. 10-13)

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<sup>12</sup> In 1942, to a nation living under the threat of Japanese invasion, these lines must have held special significance.

The modern New Zealander is warned against resting on past accomplishments. By no amount of self-congratulation and celebrations ("speeches/Pinning on the Past like a decoration"), nor even the "most painstaking history," can the present generation fruitfully link themselves to their forefathers. Rather, the poet concludes,

Only by a more faithful memory, laying  
 On him the half-light of a diffident glory,  
 The Sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying  
     Out into our time's wave  
 The stain of blood that writes an island story.  
(11. 21-25)

Though it has many good lines, part III is probably the least successful section of this generally effective poem. The tone of this closing section is earnest and self-critical. But if the poet avoids the complacency which he warns against, what he offers is still too much like rally-day oratory to be satisfying. For "now there are no more islands to be found/And the eye scans risky horizons of its own," the problems are not easy of solution; and Curnow's conclusion seems both too easy and too general to match the vigor of the other two sections. We might speculate that the public and patriotic nature of the celebration for which the poem was written has influenced the tone of its conclusion. For elsewhere, notably in "The Unhistoric Story," which deals with much the same subject, Curnow successfully avoids the hackneyed, preferring no answer to one which is not fully honest. And even in "Landfall" the expression is quite fresh; only the idea seems cliché.

Another of Curnow's poems, while not dealing specifically with the history of New Zealand, shares one of the same themes we have seen in the foregoing works (especially "The Unhistoric Story"). The theme is that of the strangeness of life on these islands, a strangeness which makes living hard for a man. In the history poems Curnow seems to stress the uniqueness of the New Zealand situation; here, however, as he develops the theme of strangeness and isolation, the island-dweller (and in particular, the New Zealander) becomes a type for mankind, facing an essential isolation and alienation which is common to the race.

"The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch" is listed in the Penguin anthology as "Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet (iii)." A simple, well-organized sonnet, it is one of Curnow's most effective pieces.

The skeleton of the moa on iron crutches  
 Broods over no great waste; a private swamp  
 Was where this tree grew feathers once, that hatches  
 Its dusty clutch, and guards them from the damp.

Interesting failure to adapt on islands,  
 Taller but not more fallen than I, who come  
 Bone to his bone, peculiarly New Zealand's.  
 The eyes of children flicker round this tomb

Under the skylights, wonder at the huge egg  
 Found in a thousand pieces, pieced together  
 But with less patience than the bones that dug  
 In time deep shelter against ocean weather:

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,  
 Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

Comparing himself, a modern New Zealander, to the moa, a giant flightless bird which disappeared from New Zealand even

before the coming of the Maori, the poet does not attempt to explain the "failure to adapt on islands." Nor does he try to prescribe a remedy. Avoiding any moralizing, he exposes sympathetically but not sentimentally the plight of a man who has not learned and cannot hope for himself to learn "the trick of standing upright here." We see this man at first as the New Zealand poet and then, by an extension of the metaphor, as modern man, alone and unsure in an indifferent or hostile world. At the same time we are offered the hope that some future generation, "born in a marvellous year," will make the necessary adjustment.

It is not without reason that Curnow chooses his country as a metaphor for the world in which man is a stranger. The feeling of isolation and alienation is a significant factor in New Zealand life. History and geography have combined to make this so. The land itself appeared (and still appears) very strange to eyes unaccustomed to the volcanic contours and the unique native vegetation. And colonization over the past 120 years has created a nation many of whose citizens still look to England, some 12,000 miles away, as "Home."

Curnow deals specifically with what he calls "the spirit of exile" in at least three poems--"House and Land" (Island and Time, 1941), and the pair of sonnets in "Tomb of an Ancestor" (At Dead Low Water, 1949). The problems dealt with are those of an older generation, but the sympathy and understanding with which Curnow treats his characters suggests that he finds their problems still relevant.

The "house and land" belong to old Miss Wilson,

With her pictures on the wall,  
The baronet uncle, mother's side,  
And one she called The Hall;  
Taking tea from a silver pot  
For fear the house might fall.  
(11. 14-18)

The situation is developed in a few lines of conversation  
between "the historian" and "the cowman,"

Working for old Miss Wilson  
Since the old man's been dead.  
(11. 1-2)

Each of the three characters recognizes that all is not well,  
and their contrasting evaluations of the situation increase our  
understanding.

Miss Wilson knows only that she must keep up the family  
name.

People in the colonies, she said,  
Can't quite understand . . .  
Why, from Waiau to the mountains  
It was all father's land.  
(11. 19-22)

The cowman, on the other hand, is getting out as soon as he can  
do so decently:

I'm leaving here next winter.  
Too bloody quiet, he said.  
(11. 25-26)

And,

The spirit of exile, wrote the historian,  
Is strong in the people still.  
(11. 27-28)

The dog, trailing his chain

From the privy as far as the fowlhouse  
And back to the privy again,  
(11. 9-10)

helps in creating a mood of pathetic dejection and comes to have value as a symbol of the spirit, oppressed by but somehow still chained to its surroundings. And the poem closes:

The sensitive nor'west afternoon  
Collapsed, and the rain came;  
The dog crept into his barrel  
Looking lost and lame.  
But you can't attribute to either  
Awareness of what great gloom  
Stands in a land of settlers  
With never a soul at home.

(11. 33-40)

"Tomb of an Ancestor" contains two poems, the first, "In Memoriam R. L. M. G.," evidently honoring the poet's maternal grandmother, and the companion piece, "To Fanny Rose May," addressed to his great-aunt. The mood here is both gentler and more positive than in the earlier "House and Land," as though perhaps the poet himself, in the intervening years, had come closer to making his peace with the country he calls "this Isle/of her oblivion, our broad day." The picture of R. L. M. G. is entirely sympathetic, without the touch of satire found in the characterization of Miss Wilson. The picture of her homesickness for the Mother Country is one of Curnow's most effective.

The oldest of us burst into tears and cried  
Let me go home, but she stayed, watching  
At her staircase window ship after ship ride  
Like birds her grieving sunsets; there sat stitching

Grandchildren's things. She died by the same sea.

(11. 1-5)

In "To Fanny Rose May," Curnow addresses a sister of R. L. M. G.:



Great-aunt, surviving of that generation  
 Whose blood sweetens the embittered seas between  
 Fabulous old England and these innovations  
 My mountainous islands . . .

(11. 1-4)

The poet, with his living relative, praises the voyage which brought the English sisters to "those slopes which seem barbaric"; and while he acknowledges the memory of the English heritage, he declares that his praise, his blood, and his name have their source in the New Zealand hillsides. The general tone of these two poems, along with such phrases as "my mountainous islands" and "this Isle/Of . . . our broad day" could be construed as evidence that the poet is indeed demonstrating a growing acceptance of his homeland, that perhaps he has achieved the acclimatization of imagination the lack of which has been one of his chief themes.

Curnow's later poems--represented in A Small Room With Large Windows by fifteen pieces from Poems 1949-57 and one other poem, "An Oppressive Climate, A Populour Neighborhood," dated 1961--are by and large much less accessible than his earlier work. Louis Johnson sees a "basic shift of ground," toward poetry for specialists.<sup>13</sup> Few of these later poems seem to deal with the themes of national identity, which fact in itself may support the theory that Curnow had by this time made his peace with his country. Further support for this theory may be found in one of the poems in this group which does touch on the theme of nationality. "Elegy On My Father" wonders at the death

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<sup>13</sup> New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, XI, p. 26.

of a loved one in November in the New Zealand spring, while in England the poet is under autumn skies of "unriven marble." When, he asks, "did a wind of the extreme South before/Mix autumn, spring, and death?" But the attitude toward New Zealand, with its "grass green in my absent spring," is one of nostalgia; and the poet asks forgiveness for "the pride of all our voyages./That the salt winds which scattered us blow softer."

There are other of Curnow's poems which might be examined-- the sonnet "Sailing or Drowning"; "To Forget Self and All," a late and rather obscure poem which shows the influence of Wallace Stevens; the lovely and difficult "Spectacular Blossoms;" "Spring, 1942," in which the poet asserts:

. . . we do not choose our islands,  
But mountains are magnets where  
Our fathers sailed under,  
Heroes or hangdog exiles  
Or (it doesn't matter) marooned.

(11. 63-67)

These and others might be studied, but the poems already dealt with are typical of Curnow's best work and amply show his approach to the problem of "making a home for the imagination."

We see, then, in Curnow, a poet very much concerned through much of his work with the task of shaping a national identity. His purpose (in his earlier work at least) is, as Johnson says, "to make New Zealand articulate to itself and to anyone else who will listen."<sup>14</sup> He seeks to accomplish this

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<sup>14</sup> New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, XI, p. 26.

task by examining the nation's history and by dealing imaginatively with the problems of isolation and alienation which he sees as arising from that history. When he is most successful, as in "The Great Moa" or "House and Land," the specifically New Zealand situation often becomes a metaphor for the human situation. No completely satisfactory answers are ever given, but the later poems, moving away from the questions which seemed so urgent earlier, would seem evidence of a contentment with (or resignation to?) the view of the world offered from "a small room with large windows."

#### A. R. D. FAIRBURN

Fairburn, like Curnow, takes his stance as a New Zealander and often turns his thoughts toward his country. He uses the native physical setting naturally and without self-consciousness. Like most (perhaps all) New Zealand poets, he shows a familiarity with the sea which has bred not contempt but fascination. "The Estuary," for example, describes a moonlit New Zealand seashore:

The wind has died, no motion now  
in the summer's sleepy breath. Silver the sea-grass,  
the shells and the driftwood, fixed in the moon's vast  
crystal.

(11. 1-3)

After we are long dead, the poet muses,

this water will still be crawling up the estuary,  
fingering its way among the channels, licking the stones;  
and the floating shells, minute argosies  
under the giant moon, still shoreward glide  
among the mangroves on the creeping tide.

(11. 8-12)

Man's feeling of insignificance before the immensities of time and tide is not a new theme, but Fairburn's statement of it is effective. The poem closes with the suggestion of mystery which is common to many of Fairburn's poems.

. . . The world's a shell  
 where distant waves are murmuring of a time  
 beyond this time. Give me the ghost of your hand:  
unreal, unreal the dunes,  
the sea, the mangroves, and the moon's white light,  
unreal, beneath our naked feet, the sand. (11. 15-20)

Fairburn's most striking treatments of New Zealand scenery are in the long poem "To a Friend in the Wilderness" and in the section of Dominion entitled "Elements." Both poems pay tribute to the beauty of the poet's native land, though in "To a Friend in the Wilderness" (to be discussed later) the tribute is subordinate to other themes.

The opening lines of "Elements" take us through the four seasons: summer,

. . . in the clay country,  
 the road before us trembling in the heat  
 and on the warm wind the scent of tea-tree; (11. 1-3)

autumn, with "good fishing, and burdened orchards"; winter, when

headlands loomed in mist,  
 hills were hailswept, flowers were few;  
 and when we rode on the mountains in frosty weather  
 the distant ranges ran like blue veins through the land; (11. 14-17)

and finally spring, when

. . . we thrust our way through the bush,  
 through the ferns in the deep shadow angled with sunbeams,  
 roamed by streams in the bush, by the scarred stones  
 and the smooth stones water worn, our shoulders wet  
 with rain from the shaken leaves. (11. 18-22)

The poet unashamedly declares his love for his country, as he addresses her thus:

. . . O natal earth,  
the atoms of your children  
are bonded to you for ever.

(11. 33-35)

Within the context of the whole of Dominion, this tribute does not seem over-stated or sentimental, and the "fair earth" addressed in the closing lines may be seen to have significance beyond the merely national, as the poet asks

let us come to you  
barefoot, as befits love.  
as the boy to the trembling girl,  
as the child to the mother;  
seeking before all things the honesty of substance,  
Fair earth, we have broken our idols:  
and after the days of fire we shall come to you  
for the stones of a new temple.

(11. 73-77, 90-92)

Fairburn shares to some extent Curnow's interest in finding meaning in New Zealand's past. Looking at the history of his nation, he notices especially the paradoxes of old and new which are found in the New Zealand situation: an old land, haunted by generations of Maori dead--newly discovered by Europe and colonized as a hopeful experiment in social planning; a natural paradise, innocently barbaric--spoiled by the immigrants who bring with them, in their very hearts, the seeds of an older evil. "In the Younger Land" suggests the paradoxes without elaborating on them.



"symbols of death and desire" is individual and with geographical boundaries.

To stave off disaster, or bring the devil to heel,  
or to fight against fear, some carry a ring or a locket,  
but I, who have nothing to lose by the turn of the wheel,  
and nothing to gain, I carry the world in my pocket.

For all I have gained, and have lost, is locked up in this  
thing,  
this cup of cracked bone from the skull of a fellow long  
dead,  
with a hank of thin yellowish hair fastened in with a ring,  
For a symbol of death and desire these tokens are wed.

The one I picked out of a cave in a windy cliff-face  
where the old Maoris slept, with a curse on the stranger  
who moved,  
in despite of tapu, but a splinter of bone from that place.  
The other I cut from the head of the woman I loved.

Fairburn's most complete treatment of the paradoxes of old and new comes in "Album Leaves," the second section of his long poem Dominion. We will look at Dominion as a whole later, but the "Imperial" section of "Album Leaves" is important by itself for the historical perspective it offers. The story is the same one that Curnow deals with in his historical poems.

In the first days, in the forgotten calendars,  
came the seeds of the race, the forerunners: (11. 1-2)

outcasts, adventurers, "the multitude of the poor," crossing

. . . parallels of boredom, tropics  
of hope and fear, losing the pole-star, suffering  
world of water, chaos of wind and sunlight.

(11. 2-6)

Arriving in the unspoiled islands, the travellers had hopes of creating an entirely new society, free of the evils of the old country. But the dreams of perfection in the new land were

soon shattered, says the poet, for the motives of the immigrants were not pure:

Haven of hunger; landfall of hope;  
goal of ambition, greed and despair.

In tangled forests under the gloom  
of leaves in the green twilight,  
among the habitations of the older gods  
they walked, with Christ beside them,  
and an old enemy at hand, one whose creed  
flourished in virgin earth. They divided the land;  
some for their need, and some  
for aimless, customary greed  
that hardened with the years, grew taut  
and knotted like a fist. Flower and weed  
scattered upon the breeze  
their indiscriminate seed; on every hillside fought  
God's love against the old antagonist.  
They change the sky but not their hearts who cross the seas.  
(11. 21-36)

After this climax, the history having been reviewed and the link between local and universal established, the poet looks at the present and ponders the future for his islands:

. . . Of three races<sup>16</sup>  
the home: two passing in conquest  
or sitting under the leaves, or on shady doorsteps  
with quiet hands, in old age, childless.  
And we, the latest: their blood on our hands.  
(11. 42-46)

It is not yet clear, concludes the poet, what New Zealand shall be. But innocence is no longer possible. The dream is hopelessly tainted.

Another of Fairburn's themes, expatriation, arises from the failure of this ideal. One course which may suggest itself to the disillusioned patriot is simply to give up and go

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<sup>16</sup> The prehistoric "Moa-hunter," the Maori, and the Pakeha (white New Zealander). For a time the Maori race seemed destined to die out as had the Moa-hunters before them.



elsewhere. In the case of a small and isolated country there may seem special inducements to the gifted individual to leave home--and the losses of talent are felt keenly by the community. In New Zealand letters, Katherine Mansfield is the outstanding example of the successful expatriate, but there have been others. (In another field of creative endeavor, physicist Ernest Rutherford is an expatriate often cited by the Kiwis themselves.) Though the problem is perhaps less now than it has been, expatriation is still an issue in New Zealand. Concerned New Zealanders fear that their nation is being weakened seriously by what they call "the brain-drain"--the flow of educated and able young people to Australia, England, the United States, any place where the pastures of opportunity seem greener than they are at home.

Fairburn treats expatriation directly in at least two short poems, as well as in Dominion. Of one of the shorter poems, "I'm Older than You, Please Listen," Allen Curnow says: "I should have thought no short poem could [so] express the tragi-comic plight of the New Zealander vacillating between his homeland and 'overseas.'"<sup>17</sup> Get out while you can, the poet warns his compatriots.

This land is a lump without leaven,  
a body that has no nerves.  
Don't be content to live in  
a sort of second-grade heaven  
with first-grade butter, fresh air,  
and paper in every toilet;  
.....

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<sup>17</sup> The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, p. 47.

If you're enterprising and able,  
 smuggle your talents away,  
 hawk them in livelier markets  
 where people are willing to pay.

.....  
 if you feel that you need success  
 and long for a good address,  
 don't anchor here in the desert--  
 the fishing isn't so good:  
 take a ticket for Megalopolis,  
 don't stay in this neighbourhood!

(11. 7-12, 17-20, 25-30)

Perhaps to appreciate fully the force of the satire here one needs to know the New Zealand people and their attitudes toward themselves--their pride in the "first-grade butter" and in the virtual elimination of poverty from their land, their irritation at foreign exchange limitations which make overseas purchases difficult, their sensitivity to charges of provincialism. But though the outsider may miss some of the subtleties, the central thrust of Fairburn's "advice" is obvious. And it becomes clear, as the poem proceeds, that the satirist's knife has two edges--one for use against the faults of the New Zealand society and the other for the "enterprising and able" who would desert their own country to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

In complementary contrast with the satire of "I'm Older than You," is the nostalgia of "To an Expatriate." The two poems taken together give evidence of Fairburn's versatility. "To an Expatriate" is prefaced by a quotation from Jeremiah 22:10. ("Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country.") This quotation, and the absence of any especially localizing scenery, suggest that Fairburn was

thinking not exclusively of a New Zealand expatriate but of anyone who had left his "native nameless hills."

Pine for the needles brown and warm,  
 think of your nameless native hills,  
 the seagulls landward blown by storm,  
 the rabbit that the bleak dog kills.

Swing with the help the ocean sucks,  
 call to the winds and hear them roar,  
 the westerly that rips the flax,  
 the madman at the northeast door.

Dream of the mountain creek that spills  
 among the stones and cools your feet,  
 the breeze that sags on smoky hills,  
 the bubble of the noonday heat.

The embers of your old desire  
 remembered still will glow, and fade,  
 and glow again and rise in fire  
 to plague you like a debt unpaid,  
 to haunt you like a love betrayed.

In "Elements" (discussed in some detail above), Fairburn makes a further statement of his attitude toward expatriation. "To prosper in a strange land," he says,

taking cocktails at twilight behind the hotel curtains,  
 buying cheap and selling dear, acquiring customs,  
 is to bob up and down like a fisherman's gaudy float  
 in a swift river.

(11. 48-52)

"To a Friend in the Wilderness," one of three long poems collected in the volume Three Poems (Wellington, 1952) is a dialogue on another temptation to opt out of society: a temptation to take up what may be seen as a sort of mirror-image expatriation, an isolation within an already isolated homeland. The friend of the title pleads with the poet to come away to the wilderness, to leave the vain struggle with society. "For God's sake chuck it," says the friend, "join me and share my

crust,/the world well lost." And the poet replies:

Old friend, dear friend,  
your voice comes to me through the scrawled words  
like a bell ringing in the riotous midnight,  
like news of peace through static.

(11. 19-20)

He would wish to come, "would choose/to live in peace in one place." He recalls past pleasures and muses on the beauty and innocence of a life close to nature, where "despair withers in the sun, in the salt air,/love goes gloveless." To his friend he declares:

I would come if it were not so  
that something says to me, No.

(11. 158-159)

You are fooling yourself, the friend argues.

Now what have you been reading, to queer your guts?  
Ralph Waldo Trine? A sentimental tract  
aiming to prove that miracle is fact,  
or saying that modern men, given a chance,  
are better lovers than haters? . . .

. . . . .  
. . . Let's be spectators  
on this other planet, governed by us alone.

(11. 165-169, 175-176)

The poet replies that he knows the world is full of evil and "that in terms of thought/these problems are insoluble." But he refuses the easy way out which is offered by his friend, safe in his "wilderness of sea and mountain,/far from this wilderness that men have built," unable to hear the cries of the world's distress. Rather than join his friend in retreat, the poet takes his stand in "all that is human," and declares that

. . . til at length  
 I reach the end of action, the last of my strength,  
 I cannot sever the bond,  
 destroy the documents, cut the cord  
 of my origin and being. This is my world.  
 (11. 418-422)

This poem, which Curnow (Penguin, p. 47) calls Fairburn's "final poetic testament," is an eloquent repudiation of isolationism. It takes added significance from the fact that in New Zealand, so small and geographically remote, isolationism does seem at times a real alternative to the struggles of involvement.

Fairburn's most extended criticism of New Zealand comes in Dominion, a long and rather uneven work first published separately in 1938 and later included in Three Poems (1952). The longest of the Three Poems, Dominion looks at New Zealand from the view-point of a thoughtful native son who sees both the evils of his society and its potential for good. As Curnow says, Dominion expresses Fairburn's thoughts "about the colonial dream and the waking reality for a modern New Zealander."<sup>18</sup> And, as in "Wilderness," Fairburn through his concern for New Zealand society comments on human society anywhere. A considerable part of Dominion is satiric, yet Fairburn explains in a note in the 1952 volume that he had "always thought of the satire as being somewhat incidental to the main theme, which emerges in the last three sections."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, Three Poems: Dominion, The Voyage, and To a Friend in the Wilderness (Wellington, 1952), p. 67.

"Utopia," the first of five sections, comments satirically on the human greed and weakness which have caused the failure of the New Zealand dream:

For the enslaved, the treadmill;  
the office and adoration  
of the grindstone god;

(11. 16-18)

and for all,

. . . the constriction of life essential  
to the maintenance of the rate of profit.

(11. 28-29)

Neither organized religion nor the press ("ironing out opinions,/scarifying the edges of ideas") has any really creative contribution to make. "In vicarage and manse," says the poet, "love is loose-lipped and flaps its feathers"; "the Church Hesitant," unable to heal itself much less offer any strong word to society, has only

. . . ifs and whethers,  
spume of futility blown  
from raging seas of sin.

(11. 33-35)

Those who run the press are (like Milton's priests) but "hirelings,"

blinde mouthes;  
insulated against discontent  
born dumb and tractable, swift to disremember  
the waif, and the hurt eyes of the passing stranger,  
and the statistics of those who killed themselves  
or were confined in asylums for the insane.

(11. 85-90)

In a society like this, "the idea dies;/or spreads like plague." The poet pronounces judgment on the decadence he sees:

Above the city's heap, life's bones  
 licked clean, void of desire,  
 white clouds like images of fear  
 move in the barren blue; the sun's cold fire  
 shines in the infinite crystal  
 the ghastly clear  
 frozen emptiness of air  
 and formless being above the walls,  
 beyond the concrete edges of despair.  
 A death has been arranged and will take place  
 none knows where or when, none cares  
 how soon the wind will whisper 'Soon, soon,'  
 shaking the dead leaves in the city square  
 at noon, in darkening air.

(11. 134-147)

The irregular rhyme echoes hollowly through this vision of the destruction of a society by itself.

"Album Leaves," the second major section of Dominion, is made up of a series of short poems, each with its own title. The first of the leaves, "Imperial," has already been mentioned in connection with Fairburn's interest in the paradoxes of New Zealand history. Within Dominion, "Imperial" serves as an explicit key to the riddle of the failure of men's attempts at Utopia. The dream of a perfect society, says the poet, is doomed from the start by man's imperfect nature. No matter where they go, men bring within themselves the seeds of both flowers and weeds:

God's love against the old antagonist.  
 They change the sky but not their hearts who cross the seas.  
 (11. 35-36)

"The Possessor," one of the last of the "Album Leaves," is a brief, vivid evocation of the sense of loss produced by the failure of a dream.

On my land grew a green tree  
 that gave shade to the weary,  
 peace to my children, rest to the travel-stained;  
 and the waters ran beneath, the river of life.

\* \* \* \* \*  
 I cut down the tree, and made posts  
 and fenced my land,  
 I banished my people and turned away the traveller;  
 and now I share my land with sparrows that trespass  
 upon my rood of air. The earth  
 is barren, the stream is dry; the sun has blackened  
 grass that was green and springing, flowers that were fair.  
 (ll. 164-167, 173-179)

The third major section of Dominion is "Elements."<sup>20</sup>

Within the context of Dominion, this emotional tribute to the poet's homeland stands in striking contrast to the satiric comment of the preceding sections. The praise of the land's beauty--

Land of mountains and running water  
 rocks and flowers  
 and the leafy evergreen . . . (ll. 31-33)

and the concern with the meaning of that beauty--

touch of soil and wind and rock,  
 frost and flower and water,  
 the honey of the senses, the food  
 of love's imagining; and the most intimate  
 touch of love, that turns to being;  
 (ll. 78-82)

are familiar themes in Fairburn. Here they prepare the way for hope, as introduced by the lines which close the section:

Fair earth, we have broken our idols:  
 and after the days of fire we shall come to you  
 for the stones of a new temple.  
 (ll. 90-92)

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<sup>20</sup> Above, p. 24.



The "Dialogue" (Section Four) is between two voices. One, speaker B, in despair at man's apparent inability to withstand evil, predicts violence as the only possible conclusion to the matter:

What shall we do but fall in the ripe hour  
to blindest action, become the pure insensate  
energy of destruction, rend and rip  
the womb from which we sprang? We have no hope  
to change men's hearts, no words to prick their  
comfort.

We are the starved cells, death's proselytes,  
and what we cannot mend we shall destroy.  
(ll. 69-73, 76-77)

But speaker A, developing the note of hope found at the end of "Elements," declares his faith in man's ability "to shatter the repeating pattern of events,/limiting evil, so gaining limited good." Man will survive "chaos returning and the night of death," he says, and beyond despair will find "a simple wisdom."

"Struggle in a Mirror," the short final section of Dominion, begins with an apocalyptic image:

The hour shall strike, and the streets fill  
with the red-eyed herdes:  
and the beast  
shall arise and trample the earth.  
(ll. 1-4)

If we take our clue from Curnow's phrase "the colonial dream and the waking reality,"<sup>21</sup> we may see these final two sections as referring to the traumatic passage of a nation from colonial domination to national independence. But some of the imagery here seems really too strong for such an application. A more

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<sup>21</sup> Penguin, p. 47.

satisfactory interpretation may be that Fairburn has shifted his focus from the local to the universal.

It seems the "limited good" of "Dialogue" is not enough; only utter destruction can atone for the past. The catastrophe is brought about by man himself. The beast, "inordinate Satan,/usurper of Godhead," is "blood of our blood, the dregs of our own hearts," and none can escape his "death rush." The result, as Fairburn describes it, will be complete desolation.

. . . angels crying  
under the crumpled arch of heaven, tongues of fire  
that shout, and fall in silence, leaving  
the carbon copy of a world of words;  
black earth, stillness of ash; world of fact.  
(11. 55-59)

Yet after all this, the seer describes a new vision, profoundly hopeful:

In the beginning was the Word:  
and in the beginning again shall be the word  
the seed shall spring in blackened earth  
and the Word be made flesh.

(11. 60-63)

The last three sections of Dominion (about two-fifths of the whole) are the most difficult part of what is, owing largely to the diversity of its elements, not at all an easy poem. Since the earlier sections are easier, it is not hard to see why the critics of whom Fairburn complained in his note "have discussed it as a satirical poem,"<sup>22</sup> largely ignoring the note of hope which emerges in the final sections. Yet exposure of the failure of what may be called the "New Zealand Dream" is

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<sup>22</sup> Three Poems, p. 67.

followed by an affirmation of renewed faith in that same dream. And it is this faith in the eventual triumph of the homeland and the human spirit even in and through defeat which Fairburn considered his "main theme" and which he hoped "would be found to have a relationship with" such a poem as "To a Friend in the Wilderness."<sup>23</sup> Thus in Dominion, as throughout his work, Fairburn shows his critical concern for the morality of his nation and his world and his stubborn faith in the eventual triumph--over complacency, greed, and fear--of man's hope in "the promised good" which "yet lives in us like a taper in the mouth of a snow-man,/our sole heritage of warmth and life" ("Dialogue," 11. 100-101).

R. A. K. MASON

Throughout the poetry of R. A. K. Mason runs a tone of skeptical stoicism, sometimes half-humorous, sometimes almost hopeless. Curnow, a great admirer of Mason, thinks this stoic reaction "represents a condition of shocked faith," the result of the clash of a "belief in the human spirit with an obstinate will-enforced scepticism about personal morality."<sup>24</sup> An example of Mason's common mood (often reminiscent of the poetry of Thomas Hardy) is found in "The Lesser Stars." Mason begins:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Penguin, p. 44.

We are they who are doomed to raise up no monuments  
 to outlast brass:  
 for even as quickly as our bodies' passing hence  
 our work shall pass  
 of us shall be no more memory left to any sense  
 than dew leaves upon grass. (11. 1-6)

We will not complain, however, he goes on; we will say it is  
 enough to have worked and made our small offering.

. . . yet indeed  
 at times we mind how we shed our best blood but to  
 leave not a stain  
 then truly our hearts bleed.

(11. 22-24)

"The Spark's Farewell to Its Clay," another poem in a similar  
 mood, muses on the parting of body and soul, moving (always in  
 a low key) from nostalgia for the sensations of life to a stoic  
 acceptance of approaching death to an acute (though still quiet)  
 sense of loss.

Curnow, in his essay, links this prevailing "condition of  
 shocked faith" in Mason's writings to a condition in New Zealand  
 society as a whole. Curnow speaks of "what he [Mason] sensed in  
 his society--its isolation, its scepticism, its misgivings that  
 the whole enterprise of living together may be inconsequent or  
 meaningless."<sup>25</sup> This failure of "the New Zealand Dream" is a  
 favorite theme of critics of New Zealand society. We have seen  
 it treated by Fairburn. Dr. William J. Cameron of McMaster  
 University, another native New Zealander, speaks of the  
 disillusionment which accompanied "an apparent loss of

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<sup>25</sup> Penguin, p. 45.

confidence in the peculiar destiny of New Zealand."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps in demonstration of his own theory Cameron, writing on "The National Character," says this: "Visitors [to New Zealand] today . . . are struck . . . by the disparity between the variety and grandeur of the country and the monotonous sameness and smallness in the mental and moral stature of its inhabitants."<sup>27</sup>

We may suspect that this self-evaluation is unnecessarily harsh, but it seems true that it is one which in some form or other has considerable currency among New Zealanders, one which, as Curnow suggests, "exerts its pressures."<sup>28</sup> It may well be that Mason's skepticism, despite its universal relevance, does have its roots deep in a peculiarly New Zealand situation.

As has been mentioned before, most of Mason's poems deal with individual and personal rather than national and social themes. Yet apparently Mason's poetry occasionally speaks to his New Zealand audience in ways which he himself did not anticipate. For example, despite Mason's statement that he intended his "Sonnet of Brotherhood" to refer to man's plight on earth, some Kiwis saw in it an analogy to New Zealand.

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<sup>26</sup> William J. Cameron, New Zealand (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 40-41.

<sup>28</sup> Curnow, Penguin, p. 45.

Garrisons pent up in a little fort  
 with foes who do but wait on every side  
 knowing the time soon comes when they shall ride  
 triumphant over those trapped and make sport  
 of them: when those within know very short  
 is now their hour and no aid can betide:  
 such as these not quarrel and divide  
 but friend and foe are friends in their hard sort

And if these things be so oh men then what  
 of these beleaguered victims this our race  
 betrayed alike by Fate's gigantic plot  
 here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place  
 this solitary hard-assaulted spot  
 fixed at the friendless outer edge of space.

To me it seems obvious that the primary reference is to all mankind, entrapped on the globe. But some New Zealand readers have compared "these beleaguered victims" to the citizens of their own island nation, "this far-pitched perilous hostile place." Reportedly, Mason, though insisting that he had meant the world, was "willing to suppose" that there might be an underlying implication of a more particular reference--i.e., to New Zealand.<sup>29</sup>

Two other poems which may have special reference to New Zealand are "The Just Statesman Dies" and "Footnote to John ii 4." In the first, the just statesman, dying, observes that most of his life, spent in seeking wisdom and serving his fellow men, has been in vain. But then he recalls a few experiences of sensuous delight, times when

All the day like a god  
 with spirit transcended  
 in warmth light and colour  
 my senses were blended.

(11. 41-44)

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<sup>29</sup> Curnow, Penguin, p. 43-44.

And he concludes,

This was time not wasted  
this was time well spent  
this was fulfillment  
and I die content.

(11. 45-48)

This poem may well be read as simply an unorthodox reflection on human life in general. However, it is possible to see in the exaltation of the individual and the sensuous a criticism of New Zealand society, in which (it has become commonplace to say) social harmony and equality are sometimes attained at the expense of individual achievement and personal freedom.

"Footnote to John ii 4" is a variation on the theme of Jesus's words to Mary at the Cana wedding feast--"Woman, what have I to do with you?"

Don't throw your arms around me in that way:  
I know that what you tell me is the truth--  
yes I suppose I loved you in my youth  
as boys do love their mothers, so they say,  
but all that's gone from me this many a day:  
I am a merciless cactus an uncouth  
wild goat a jagged old spear the grim tooth  
of a lone crag . . . Woman I cannot stay

Each one of us must do his work of doom  
And I shall do it even in despite  
of her who brought me in pain from her womb,  
whose blood made me, who used to bring the light  
and sit on the bed up in my little room  
and tell me stories and tuck me up at night.

We may see in this poem (as Allen Curnow does) the rejection by New Zealand of the mother-country, England. Certainly the image of Mother England is one which occurs in New Zealand thinking. And while there is nothing in the poem which insists on this reading, the poem is strengthened rather than weakened by the





life"--priests processing at a graveside, the fall of a city--are not necessarily New Zealand things; but the place where he is now living is clearly and matter-of-factly Auckland. The mention of One Tree Hill (a well-known Auckland landmark) is most natural. It serves to locate the speaker and his experiences but not to localize them. To a reader familiar with New Zealand place names, it may call up particular associations with the city reserve, once the site of a Maori fort. But the main effect of the reference is merely to reinforce the impression of the speaker's being at home in his surroundings. One Tree Hill is a spot familiar to the poet, a place among places in the world. Our interest is not in the locality but in the familiarity.

"A Fragment" is another poem casually set in a specific location in New Zealand. In his shop by the bridge in Penrose (Mason's boyhood home, now a suburb of Auckland) the old Jew displays his coins, candlesticks, and medals from all parts of the world. The poet's eye is especially caught by an old grey skull--

or rather two halves together set,  
proclaiming how when in Tibet  
an adulterous pair are ta'en  
the man and woman both are slain  
and the halved skulls of each the twain  
are joined:

there it is stuck up plain  
for all this distant town to stare--  
cold earnest that hot love will dare  
all things for love's sake everywhere.

(ll. 11-19)

The mention of Penrose, "this distant town," is no self-conscious reference to the isolation of New Zealand. The poet neither defends nor disparages his country; it does not occur to him to do either. He simply remarks that his home is remote from Tibet--a land with which he has nevertheless discovered a bond.

In addition to his casual references to New Zealand place names, Mason occasionally makes use of peculiarly New Zealand landscapes. In "Twenty-sixth October," for example, the sky under which a rejected lover postures--and then breaks down--is a southern sky, where "the great Cross glittered at the pole/Orion and his wrath were red." The trees in which the wind sighs are macrocarpa trees. But in the poem, an effective treatment of an age-old theme, the landscape and sky-scape are just background against which the drama is taking place. As in "Old Memories of Earth," the action is located for anyone who cares to make the association, but the statement of the poem is as universal as the pain and despair of which it speaks.

Mason's fullest use of the native landscape is in "Flow At Full Moon."

Your spirit flows out over all the land between  
 your spirit flows out gentle and limpid as milk  
 flows on down ridge and through valley as soft and serene  
 as the light of the moon that sifts down through its light  
 sieve of silk

The long fingers of the flow press forward, the whole hand  
 follows  
 easily the fingers creep they're your hair's strands that  
 curl  
 along the land's brow, your hair dark-bright gleaming on  
 heights and hollows  
 and the moon illumines the flow with mother of pearl

Beloved your love is poured to enchant all the land  
 the great bull falls still the opossum turns from his chatter  
 and the thin nervous cats pause and the strong oak-trees  
 stand  
 entranced and the gum's restless bark-strip is stilled from  
 its clatter

Your spirit flows out from your deep and radiant nipples  
 and the whole earth turns tributary all her exhalations  
 wave up in white breath and are absorbed in the ripples  
 that pulse like a bell along the blood from your body's  
 pulsations

And as the flow settles down to the sea it nets me about  
 with a noose of one soft arm stretched out from its course:  
 oh loved one my dreams turn from sleep: I shall rise  
 and go out  
 and float my body into the flow and press back till I find  
 its source.

In this sensuous love song, surely one of Mason's most beautiful,  
 the North Island countryside plays a central part. And yet, the  
 references are not distractingly local. The landscape, with its  
 moonlit ridges and its valleys settling down to the sea, is a  
 New Zealand landscape, but it does not insist on being so. The  
 chatter of the opossum and the rattle of the gum-tree bark are  
 the sounds of a New Zealand evening--but they are not obtrusive.  
 Rather these points of detail serve to give the poem a partic-  
 ularity while not at all limiting its appeal.

If our treatment of Mason seems brief in comparison with the time devoted to Curnow and Fairburn, it should not be understood as an indication of his lesser importance as a poet. He has been treated briefly only because most of his best work does not deal with New Zealand and is therefore not directly relevant to this study except in a negative way. Indeed, of our three poets Mason is probably the one with the greatest appeal to a non-New Zealand audience--this precisely because he seems most at ease with himself as a New Zealander. Mason deals at times, for example, as do Curnow and Fairburn, with isolation; but as Louis Johnson points out, Mason's is "not, in particular, . . . a 'specific New Zealand' type of isolation."<sup>30</sup> Mason does not, as does Curnow, find his most inspiring themes in the historic New Zealand situation. Nor does he share to any great extent Fairburn's occupation with the social evils of his society. When he does refer to New Zealand, it is as to one place of many in the world. Curnow, especially, sometimes strains the sympathy of a non-New Zealand reader by insisting on the New Zealand-ness of his themes. Fairburn's lyrics have a wide appeal, but his social criticism often demands a knowledge of the New Zealand situation which the average non-native does not possess. Mason, on the other hand, while he uses New Zealand as background, writes mainly on themes which are common to all men, in terms which are easily understood by any English-speaking reader.

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<sup>30</sup> New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, XI, p. 16.

In 1841, American author and critic W. G. Simms wrote that the literature of a nation must be either "'that which distinguishes and illustrates . . . [the] peculiar characteristics of the people with whom it originates; or . . . that which is produced by native writers, from the common stock of human knowledge, in a fair competition with the reflective minds of other nations."<sup>31</sup> Of our three New Zealand poets, most of the work of Curnow and much of Fairburn's would almost certainly fit into the first category. Their contribution to the literature of New Zealand and the world is primarily that of interpreting their nation's history, characterizing her people, articulating her dreams.

Mason, on the other hand, takes as his persona "the poet as Everyman,"<sup>32</sup> rather than the poet as New Zealander. Of the three, he seems most likely to stand up well "in a fair competition with the reflective minds of other nations." He has escaped (if we may think of it that way) from preoccupation with country--escaped as Fairburn does only some of the time and as Curnow only in his later poems (and then at the cost of what Johnson describes as a "diffusion . . . that was not so apparent when he was more directly concerned with specific New Zealand experiences."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> W. G. Simms, cited by Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign (Syracuse, 1937), p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, New Zealand Poetry Yearbook, XI, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

If we look at the three poets in light of Curnow's statement (cited at the beginning of the discussion) concerning the role of the poet in "making a home for the imagination," we find each poet reacting differently to the task of being a New Zealand poet. Since Mason and Fairburn were contemporaries and Curnow is only slightly younger, the differences are evidently not a matter of age or generation as Curnow seemed to think that they might be in the long run. Rather, the differences seem to be the result of individual inclinations and abilities. Identity as a New Zealander is important to all three of our poets, but this identity informs the poetry of each differently. We have in Curnow one who boldly takes as his central theme the search for a national identity; in Fairburn, one concerned with national questions in not all but a large part of his work; and, in Mason, one for whom the national identity is simply not an issue, for whom the "more personal and universal impulses" have clearly been "set at liberty."

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A HOME FOR THE IMAGINATION: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN  
THE POETRY OF ALLEN CURNOW, A. R. D. FAIRBURN,  
AND R. A. K. MASON

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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One of the needs fulfilled by a national literature is that of helping to define the national character, to establish a clear sense of national identity. The writers of a relatively new nation such as New Zealand, lacking a well-established tradition, are faced with the problem of creating their own "home for the imagination." How is this problem being solved in New Zealand? A study of three of New Zealand's most important poets--Allen Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn, and R. A. K. Mason--reveals no single answer; rather, each of the three appears to handle in a different way the issue of national identity.

For Allen Curnow, the search for the meaning of New Zealand is a central theme. Throughout a major portion of his work, he demonstrates his concern to determine what a New Zealander is and how he is related to his nation. In such poems as "The Unhistoric Story" and "Landfall," Curnow recounts and interprets events in the country's history, seeking the significance of that history for the New Zealand of today. He considers (in "Tomb of an Ancestor" and "House and Land," for example) the problems of dislocation and isolation which face the New Zealander in his tiny Pacific island country. Curnow gives no entirely satisfactory answers to the problems of the New Zealand identity; in his best works, however, he effectively raises some of the right questions.

A. R. D. Fairburn is not so much interested specifically with questions of identity. In the large body of his poetry

which is peculiarly New Zealand, Fairburn's primary concern is with the moral posture of his nation and the responsibility of the individual as a citizen. Fairburn sees in New Zealand a society depressed and stifled by the failure of a dream--and he makes the failure of this Utopian dream a major theme. Poems such as "To an Expatriate" and "I'm Older Than You, Please Listen!" suggest that the citizen cannot find satisfaction or comfort by deserting his homeland. Nor can he hope to rid society of the evils which are as old as mankind. Still, Fairburn is not totally pessimistic; in Dominion and "To a Friend in the Wilderness," he declares his faith in a "simple wisdom" which is beyond despair.

In contrast with Curnow's explicit search for the meaning of New Zealand and Fairburn's expressions of dissatisfaction with her morality, stands R. A. K. Mason's unselfconscious acceptance of his country and of his position as a native son. Most of Mason's poems deal with individual and personal rather than national and social themes. In his handling of these themes, Mason does not seek to detach himself from New Zealand; rather, his sense of identity as a New Zealander underlies and enriches his work by its very naturalness. In "Old Memories of Earth," for example, the reference to a famous Auckland landmark serves not only to locate the poem but also to reinforce the sense of the speaker's being completely at home in his corner of the earth. And the landscape in such a poem as "Flow at

Full Moon" makes effective use of particularizing detail without being distractingly local.

In these three poets, then, are seen three different approaches to the task of being a New Zealand poet. Curnow deals most consistently and explicitly with the problem of defining New Zealand, especially in terms of its history. Fairburn is also interested in the history of New Zealand, but his central concern is with the moral failure of the past and the citizen's responsibility for the present and future. Mason, whom most non-New Zealand readers will probably find most readable of the three, largely ignores the questions of history and public morality which concern the other two, seeming to speak as a poet secure in an already firm personal sense of national identity.